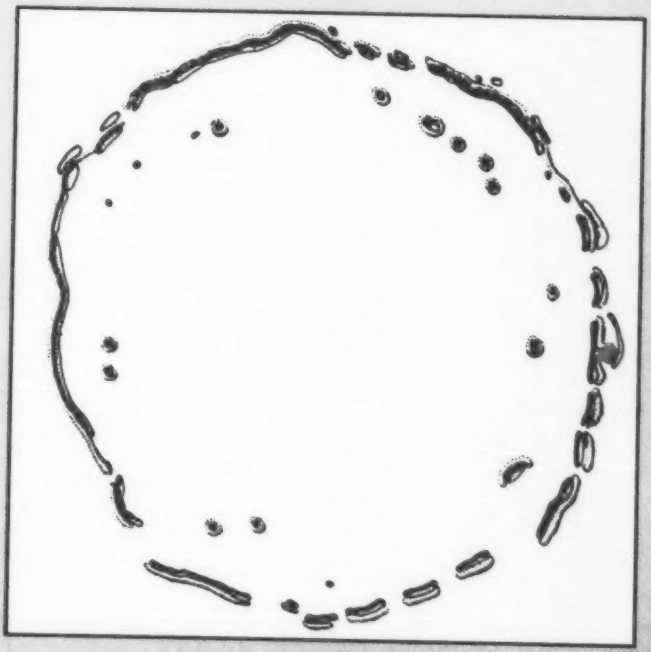
Manitoba
Culture, Heritage
and Citizenship

THE DAKOTA FORTIFIED CAMPS OF THE PORTAGE PLAIN



91-06836/

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Dakota fortified camps of the Portage Plain.

Cover title
Includes bibliographical references: p.
ISBN 0-7711-0872-9

1. Flee Island Entrenchment Site (Man.).
2. St. Ambroise Entrenchment Site (Man.).
3. St. Marks Entrenchment Site (Man.).
4. Dakota Indians -- Wars, 1862-1865.
5. Dakota Indians -- Antiquities.
6. Manitoba -- Antiquities.
7. Indians of North America -- Wars -- 1862-1865. I. Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch

E99.D1D34 1990 971.27'00497 C90-0926589

THE DAKOTA FORTIFIED CAMPS OF THE PORTAGE PLAIN

Introduction

The countryside around Portage la Prairie is exceedingly rich in history. Near the marsh that borders the southern edge of Lake Manitoba, north of High Bluff and Poplar Point, are three circular features known as the Flee Island, St. Ambroise, and St. Marks entrenchments.

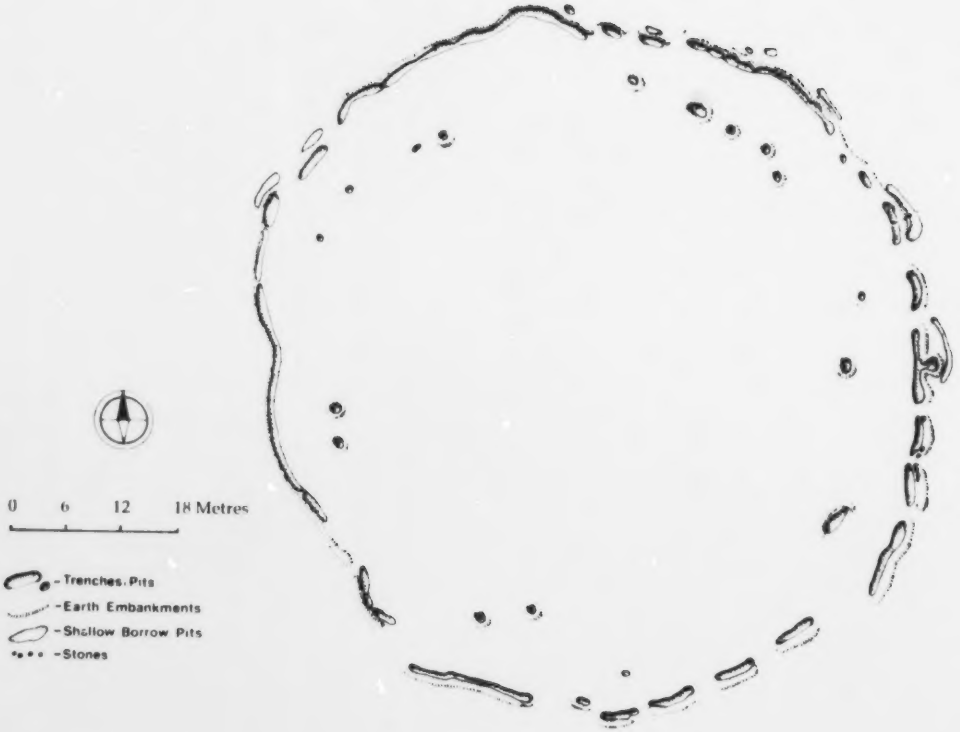
These entrenchments are the remains of Dakota or Sioux fortified campsites. Encampment fortifications usually consisted of pits and trenches surrounded by earth embankments, which were placed around campsites for defensive purposes.

Descriptions

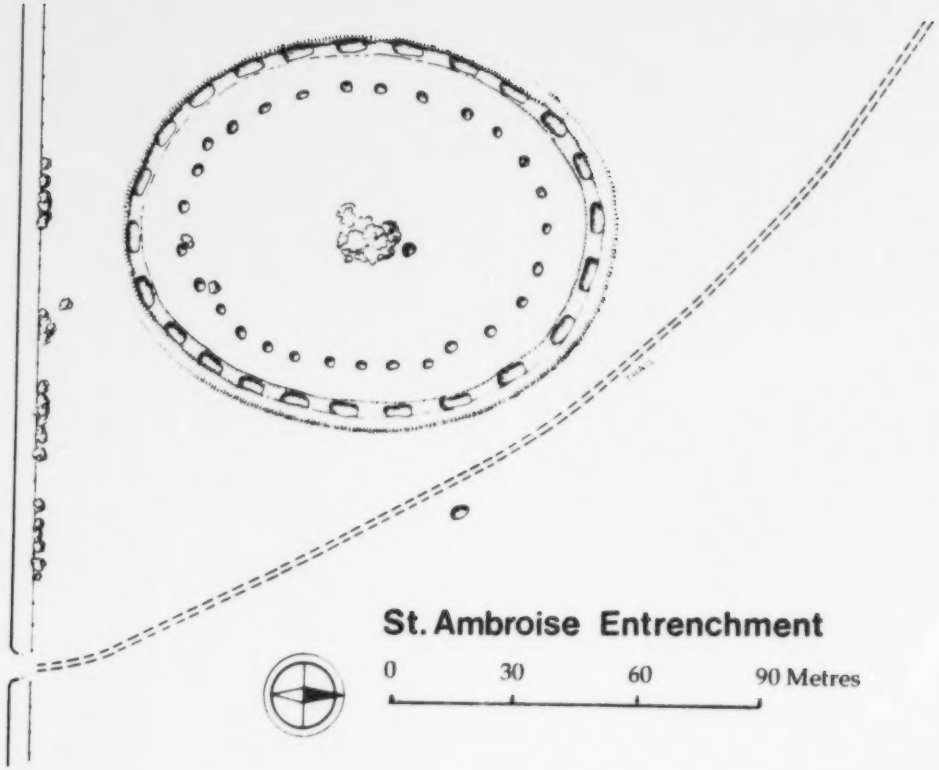
The Flee Island trench is nearly circular with a diameter of about 37 metres. It is not quite continuous, as the circumference is interrupted by several unexcavated gaps. When examined in 1972, the depth of the trench varied from 0.3 to 1 metre, and there was a semi-continuous bank of earth around the outside. Inside the enclosure were a number of deeper pits located close to the trench.

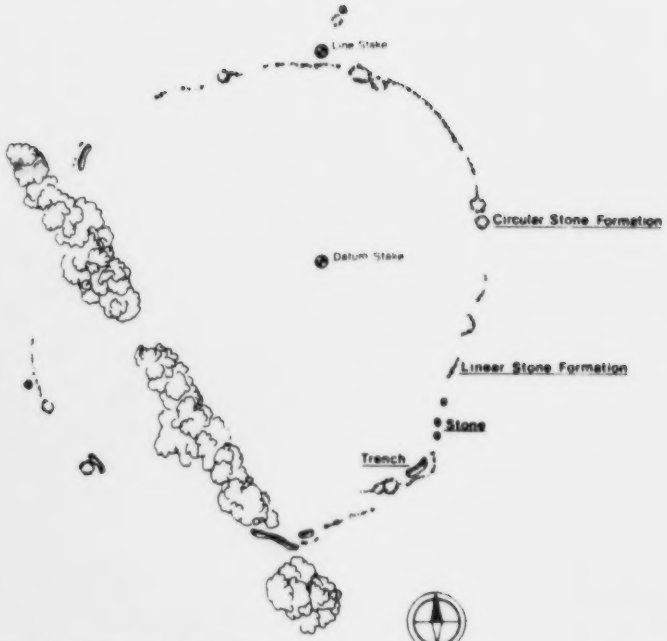
The St. Ambroise entrenchment is almost circular and some 108 metres in diameter. It is a continuous trench, unlike the one at Flee Island, but has similar interior pits and an earthen embankment around its outer edge. There are two pits outside of the trench -- a large one 64 metres to the northwest and a smaller one 20 metres to the east. What their actual functions might have been is not clear. It has been suggested that they may have been wells or observation posts.

The St. Marks Entrenchment does not appear very similar to either Flee Island or St. Ambroise. It is more oval than circular in shape and covers a far greater area, with dimensions of approximately 100 metres north to south and 90 metres east to west. An intermittent trench is present as at Flee Island, but its outer edge is lined with a single row of stones. At irregular intervals along the trench are found circular stone features, some of which have deep pits behind them. These circular heaps of stones were originally piled atop one another to form a barricade in front of the trench and pits. Local residents have referred to them as "ramparts."



Flee Island Entrenchment


St. Ambroise Entrenchment
0
30
60
90 Metres



St. Marks Entrenchment

Ten such ramparts were distinguished easily in recent years, although more of them may have existed originally. The pasture in which this feature is found is so stony that it is difficult to distinguish with certainty some portions of the entrenchment. The oval trench was likely more continuous than it appears at present. It is not particularly deep and probably has been filled in by erosion.

Historical Background

Research has shown that the Flee Island and St. Ambroise entrenchments, and possibly the St. Marks example as well, were defensive works built by Dakota people who occupied the area following the Minnesota Uprising of 1862. The entrenchments of the Portage Plain are comparatively recent examples of a tradition dating back at least 1000 years in North America, and found over a vast portion of the continent.

Mississippian Culture The most spectacular representations of this custom are to be found in the deep south and midwestern portions of the United States. Between 700 AD and the arrival of Europeans, huge areas of the Ohio, Illinois and Mississippi river drainages were occupied by people who based their livelihood on the raising of domesticated plants. They practised a religion that drew much of its inspiration from Mexico and Central America. These people lived in villages and towns dominated by flat-topped pyramids that were surrounded by entrenchments and fortifications. Archaeologists call this culture "Mississippian" because many sites occur along that river's banks.

Plains Village Culture Farther to the west, along the Missouri River, evidence has been found of a contemporary culture which appears to have been significantly influenced by the Mississippian. Referred to as "Plains Village" by archaeologists, these people were also horticulturalists who supplemented their diet with wild plant foods and the proceeds of seasonal bison hunts. They surrounded their villages with trenches and stockades.

Ćunkaśké The practice of fortifying villages was very much alive when European explorers first visited the Missouri in the mid-18th century. Indeed, it was to be found throughout the upper midwest at the time of European contact. It is believed that most of the Mississippian peoples and Plains Villagers were Siouan-speakers. The Siouan term for all manner of protective works surrounding lodges and settlements is "ćunkaśké" (pronounced "choonkashkay"). Indeed, one group of Dakota living around Lake Traverse in western Minnesota in 1853 was called the "Chonkasketonwan", which means "dwellers in a fort".

Artist's reconstruction of a Mississippian fortified town in Missouri. Length of the wall is 810 metres.

The Siouan-speaking peoples of the Middle Missouri River fortified their villages with palisades and moats.

Defensive fortifications vary considerably in terms of their size and complexity. These differences are the outcome of many factors, including the population size of the settlements and the direct circumstances leading to construction. The defensive works surrounding the Mississippian villages and towns were probably built at a fairly leisurely pace, expanding over time as the settlements grew in size. On the other hand, some defensive works were obviously hastily-built affairs thrown up in a very short time and under duress. Some good descriptions of the latter type are to be found in historical records. For example, during Zebulon Pike's journey to the upper Mississippi River in the winter of 1805-1806, he observed both Dakota and Anishinabe (Ojibwa) fortifications.

> Sept. 12th, Thursday. -- Passed the Racine river, also a prairie called Le Cross, from a game of ball played frequently on it by the Sioux Indians. ... On this prairie Mr. Frazer shewed me some holes, dug by the Sioux, when in expectation of an attack, into which they first put their women and children, and then crawl themselves. They were generally round, and about ten feet in diameter; but some were half moons, and quite a breastwork. This, I understood, was the chief work, which was the principal redoubt [fortification]. Their modes of constructing them are, the moment they apprehend or discover an enemy on a prairie, they commence digging with their knives, tomahawks, and a wooden ladle; and in an incredibly short space of time, they have a hole sufficiently deep to cover themselves and family from the balls or arrows of the enemy. The latter have no idea of taking those subterraneous redoubts by storm, as they would probably lose a great number of men in the attack; and, although they might be successful in the event, it would be considered as a very imprudent action.
>
> Oct. 5th, Saturday. -- Passed several old Sioux encampments, all fortified.

The Reverend Mr. Samuel Pond and his brother Gideon were the first missionaries to reside permanently with the Dakota. Samuel Pond discussed the Dakota customs and traditions in a paper entitled "The Dakota or Sioux as They Were in 1834." In this work, Pond describes the practice of entrenching as he had observed it:

> When a war party unexpectedly found itself in the presence of a strong force of the enemy and an attack was apprehended, entrenchments were

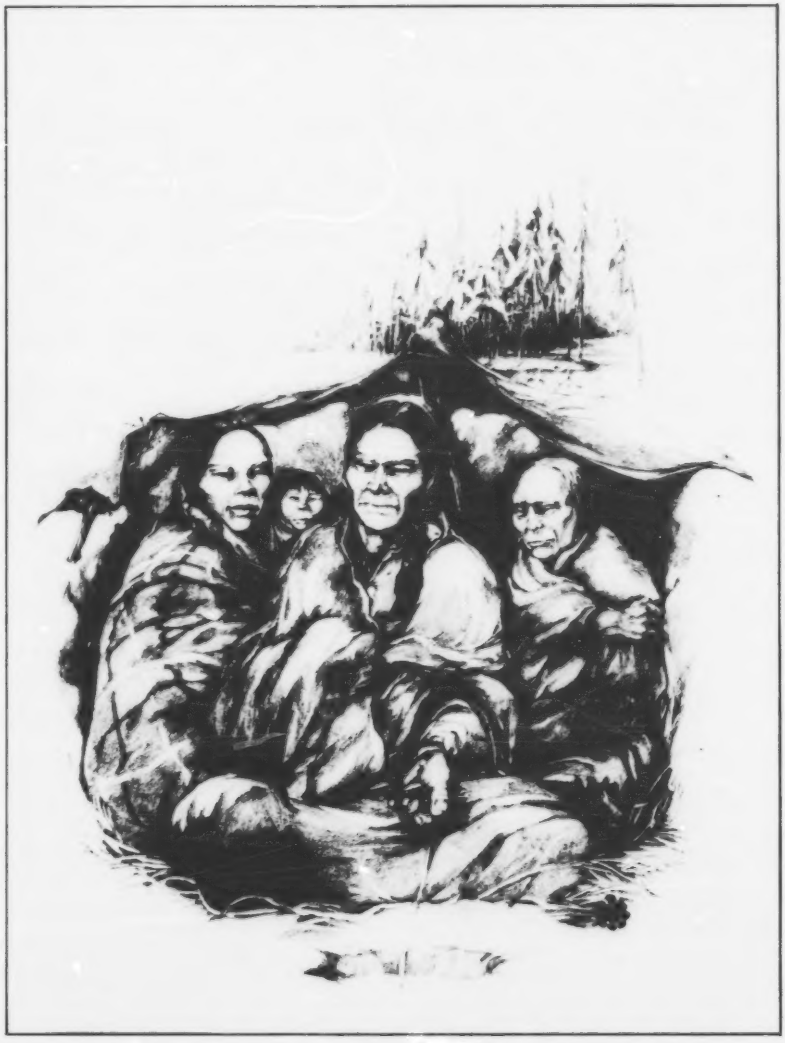
> made by digging pits in the ground, the earth being loosened up with knives and thrown out with the hands. They did not dig a long trench, but separate holes, each one selecting the place that best suited him. If they had time to finish their pits they dug them three or four feet deep, and if they found easy digging they did not require very much time and it was marvelous to see how rapidly they would throw out the earth.
>
> The inhabitants of villages prepared in a similar way for defense against an apprehended attack from a war party, although when women and children were to be protected, the pits were made large enough to accommodate families, the non-combatants sitting securely in the bottom of the trenches while the bullets whistled over their heads. I once passed a large camp of Indians in the evening and saw them dwelling quietly in their tents, but on visiting them again the next morning I found them all hidden in the ground. They had been alarmed in the night, and before daylight they were where hostile bullets could not reach them.

It is obvious, in light of the recent descriptions of them and from the very brief historical account of their construction, that the Flee Island, St. Ambroise, and St. Marks entrenchments were built under circumstances similar to those described by Zebulon Pike and Samuel Pond.

The Dakotas in Manitoba

In the summer of 1862, many of the Dakota living in Minnesota rebelled against the intolerable treatment they had received at the hands of government authorities. As a consequence of the turmoil, several hundred Dakota fled to the Red River Settlement. They felt safe in coming to what is now Manitoba; according to tradition, it had been part of their territory in earlier times. They remembered the promises of protection made to them by King George III in 1812, when they had agreed to a military alliance with the British to fight the Americans. During the years following the Minnesota Uprising, bands of Dakota occupied themselves at various places within southern Manitoba. One of these localities was the Portage Plain located between Lake Manitoba and the Assiniboine River.

In the middle of February 1864, some Dakota were reported to be fishing on Lake Manitoba, where their catch was so great that they used surplus jackfish to barter with local settlers for supplies. A week later the Dakota were still fishing, but were reported to be leaving soon to go hunting. At the end of April, however, at least twelve lodges were still fishing on the lake. Early one morning during the



Dakota people were fishing on Lake Manitoba shortly before the Čunkaške were built.

first week of May 1864, their camp was attacked by Chippewa bounty hunters believed to have come from Red Lake, Minnesota. The Red River Settlement's newspaper, *The Nor'Wester*, reported this raid and noted that the Dakota were "busily engaged in fortifying their present encampment" by "digging rude earthworks and rifle pits." In his 1871 history of the Selkirk Settlement, J.J. Hargrave said that the Dakota took "immediate precautions against such another surprise, and by digging pits contrived to construct a camp which they would always be able to defend."

Tradition locates this first attack on or near Bluebill Bay, 25 km north of High Bluff. This district of the province and the subsequent fortified or entrenched camp built by the Dakota are called "Flee Island" in reference to the Chippewa raid and to the necessity of the Dakota to flee for their lives. Following the initial attack, the Dakota, who were carrying all their possessions with them in wagons, probably formed a defensive camp wherein the wagons were placed in a circle above trenches that had been previously excavated. Behind them were dug pits in which the women and children could conceal themselves for protection, according to the descriptions by Pike and Pond.

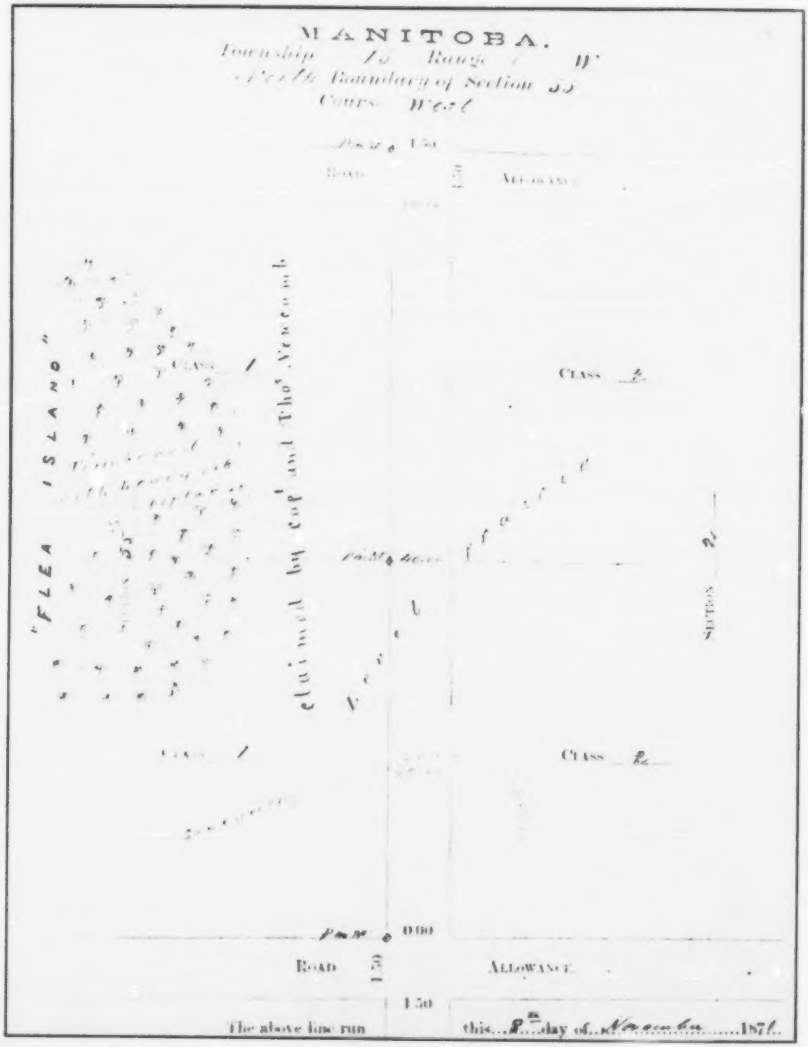
It is most likely that the Flee Island ćunkaśké relates to the first attack by the Red Lake Chippewa. Seven years later, in 1871, when R.W. Hermon conducted the first legal survey of the Portage la Prairie region, a large wooded area comprising the west half of Section 35, Township 13, Range 6 West was noted as "Flea Island". This location is 1 mile west and 3 miles north of the Flee Island Entrenchment, midway between it and Bluebill Bay.

Under what circumstances the other two entrenchments were built is not clear. The issue is further complicated by the fact that local Ojibwa were reported in *The Nor'Wester* to be building fortifications in February of 1864 -- a response, no doubt, to the general unrest that existed in the district during those difficult times.

The Years That Followed

The decade of the 1870s saw many changes take place in southern Manitoba. Under Louis Riel, a short-lived Provisional Government was established; the Hudson's Bay Company's title to Rupert's Land was transferred to the Crown; and the Province of Manitoba was created. A joint Canadian-U.S. Commission surveyed the boundary between the two nations. Settlers began to arrive seeking farmland, making necessary a legal survey of the province and, equally as important, the disposition of Indian claims to the land.

A series of treaties were made with the Indian groups across western Canada whereby they relinquished


MANITOBA.
"FLEA ISLAND"
CLASS 1
CLASS 2
ROAD
ALLOWANCE
1320
1320
1320

Artist's impression of a band of Dakota on the march in 1874.
Courtesy of the Public Archives of Manitoba.

A Dakota encampment at Turtle Mountain, 1874.
Courtesy of the Public Archives of Manitoba.

claim to their former homelands and the reserve system was established. The Dakota, with whom Canada did not sign treaties, petitioned the federal government to grant them reserves as well. Four Dakota reserves were established during the 1870s -- on Birdtail Creek near Fort Ellice (Birdtail Creek Indian Reserve #57), on the Assiniboine River at Oak River (Sioux Valley Indian Reserve #58), on Pipestone Creek (Oak Lake Indian Reserve #59), and a one-square-mile reserve on the northwest slopes of Turtle Mountain (Turtle Mountain Indian Reserve #60), which was subsequently closed in the early 1900s.

Some of the Dakota who lived on the Portage Plain were reluctant to move to reserves. They remained in this area, hunting, fishing, trapping and working as labourers for local farmers. In 1893 however, sponsored by local residents, 21 Dakota purchased River Lot 99 at the eastern end of the Portage la Prairie settlement. Several years later, Lot 14 was added to their holdings. However, encouraged by government officials, many families had moved to lands adjacent to the Ojibwa Long Plain Reserve (Long Plain Sioux Reserve 6A) by the mid 1930s. Some Dakota remained on Lot 99 until the late 1950s, when new lands were acquired for them on River Lot 25. This new location became the Dakota Tipi Reserve.

Some Dakota never moved to reserves. The "Flee Island" locale was home to as many as twelve Dakota families as late as 1920. Some of their descendants still live in this part of the province today.

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FLEE ISLAND DAKOTA ENTRENCHMENT

The eastern Dakota (Sioux) of Minnesota traditionally built "ćunkaśké" (pronounced choonkashkay) -- wooden palisades, piles of stones and earthen entrenchments -- around their camps and villages for protection against the elements, wild animals and potential enemies. One group was even referred to as the "Cunkasketonwan", Nation of the Forts.

In the summer of 1862 many Dakota openly rebelled against the intolerable treatment they had received from American authorities. As a result, several hundred moved north to the relative safety of the Red River Settlement. In the spring of 1864, following an attack by Chippewa bounty hunters from Minnesota, the Dakota constructed fortified camps in the Portage la Prairie district. Each camp was enclosed by a circular trench and embankment behind which armed defenders could position themselves. Inside this circle was a ring of pits where the women and children could take refuge in the event of an attack. The remains of one such ćunkaśké, known as The Flee Island Entrenchment, is located in the area behind this marker.

THE MANITOBA HERITAGE COUNCIL.

PROVINCIAL COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUES PROGRAM

Manitoba's Provincial Commemorative Plaques Program honours those people, places and events which have contributed to the province's development. To date, more than 100 plaques have been erected.

Proposals to commemorate Manitoba's heritage resources come from many sources, including interested groups and individuals. After careful research by the Historic Resources Branch, proposals are submitted for recommendation to an advisory board composed of historians, archaeologists, architects and others active in the heritage field. Those deemed to have provincial rather than local significance are forwarded to the Minister of Culture, Heritage and Recreation for final decision.

Plaques are usually located at sites associated with the people, places or events being honoured.